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ABSTRACT

The report describes the development and operation of a communal laundry center, or housewife club in Netivot, Israel which provides laundry facilities, a social meeting place, and a variety of classes and services for users. The proposal for the club grew out of the difficulties facing the district social welfare bureau in solving the laundry problems of large families in the low-income community of 6,000 persons. During the three-year planning phase, community workers, trained by the Ministry of Social Welfare's Service for Community Work, interviewed residents to assess their needs and established a joint administrative committee of local authority and social welfare agency representatives. Characteristics of the population and the town, physical facilities of the laundry, center ownership and administration, and procedures for its daily operation are discussed. Participation in center activities (classes, films, lectures, and parent counseling sessions) by an average of 60 families a day from all sectors of the population is described. The report concludes that the club has become a family center which has improved community and family relations while serving as a model for similar clubs under construction throughout Israel. (Author/MS)

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Ministry of Social Welfare
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THE HOUSEWIFE CLUB

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Demonstration project, in the town of Netivot,
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Introduction

The population of Netivot comprises approximately 1,000 families – about 6,000 persons – 97% of whom originate from Asia-Africa and the remainder of whom are Israeli-born or immigrants from Europe and America.

Ever since its foundation in 1966, about 37,000 residents have passed through the town. Therefore, the proportion between the total number of persons who have passed through the town and those who have stayed is six to one. In the last few years, the population has been relatively stable for the following reasons:

1. Adaptation to the town.
2. The lack of possibility of moving to another locality due to low social and economic potential, low level of education and lack of professional training.
3. Preference of the town because of its religious character.

The geographic position of Netivot and the low level of education of its residents (about 50% have completed up to four years of elementary school; 32.9% have no education; 17.9% have completed four grades, 25.4% have completed five to eight grades, 22.6% have completed nine to twelve grades, and 1.2% have completed twelve grades or more) are among the factors which prevent the development of high-standard branches of employment. Therefore, despite the fact that there is no unemployment in the town, the income level of the residents is still low, due to the limited nature of local employment.

Netivot is divided into neighbourhoods, one of which is the neighbourhood of Bar-Ilan, where the Housewife Club has been constructed. The Bar-Ilan neighbourhood, founded in 1957, is situated in the north-west corner of the town, and its last houses border on fields of the surrounding villages. One hundred and eighty families live in the neighbourhood, numbering 1,200 persons, which is one-fifth of the total population of the town. Most of these are the first settlers of the town. The neighbourhood has a synagogue, a kindergarten, two nurseries and four small shops. Their services are few and relatively small in comparison with services in the other neighbourhoods. The relative distance of the neighbourhood from the centre of the town and the composition of its population have also limited its development in comparison to the other neighbourhoods.

The Housewife Club in Netivot

The Housewife Club in Netivot was opened early in 1972. The physical structure of the club is as follows:

1. A laundry room with five washing machines.
2. A social hall also used for classes.
3. A room for small study groups.
4. A kitchen for classes in baking and cooking.
5. Washrooms.
6. A yard behind the building with facilities for drying laundry. The front yard is used as a playground for children. It has a very pleasant atmosphere, with plants which were planted by school children on the New Year for Trees.

The rooms are nicely furnished and well equipped, including corners for relaxation, chairs and tables for classes, a bookcase, room for newspapers, and a radio.

The kitchen has a samovar and a refrigerator for the use of the members.

The club has a pleasantly simple atmosphere, and its structure, equipment and surroundings are well coordinated.

Activities of the Club

The washing machines are the focal point of activity in the club, and the price of operating the machines includes all operating expenses — electricity, water and detergent. The machines wash five to seven kilogrammes of laundry.

The number of people utilizing the service has steadily increased from only three families at first to the present sixty families a day. All sectors of the population take advantage of the service — couples, young families, large families, older couples and single persons. The social welfare bureau registers families in the club and provides them with vouchers which may be exchanged for tokens for operating the machines. The one-hour wash cycle is spent by the women in various ways. Some chat over a cup of tea. Others mend clothes either by hand or on the sewing machines which are in the club. Still others go out shopping or take care of personal matters. The club also has special classes in sewing, home economics, baking and Hebrew.

The club is administered by a worker from the local municipality who is answerable to the club's management. The latter is composed of representatives of local residents and of the agencies which financed the establishment and operation of the club. Professional training is given by the community worker.

The Club's Development

At the end of 1968, the Social and Community Development Department in Netivot was presented with a proposal to establish a laundry club in the town. The plan was put forward in light of the difficulties facing the district social welfare bureau in solving the laundry problems of large families, sick and fatigued women, in cases of absence of the mother from the home due to reasons of childbirth or illness and in cases of older couples and single persons.

It was pointed out that laundry problems are not unique to persons aided by welfare, but are also encountered by most large families, older persons and people with low incomes. These people have only a small amount of clothing which becomes soiled quickly and must therefore be washed often. Most of these families lack suitable conditions, equipment and space for laundry. The drudgery and mental boredom involved in washing laundry cause the women physical and mental fatigue which detracts from other household duties and the care of the children.

The Department of Community Work had received many applications for intervention in the case of personal problems, such as disputes between husband and wife, difficulties in taking care of the children, difficulties in fulfilling the functions of a mother, mental health problems, problems of education and relations between parents and children.

Additional investigation showed that a substantial portion of the time and effort spent by the mother is devoted to laundry. An average family in Netivot does laundry at least three times a week. This detracts from the time that should be devoted to the other duties of the housewife — namely, taking care of members of the family and the household. Various solutions to the problem were suggested, but proved to be unsuccessful, so that when the idea of a communal laundry in Netivot was brought up, the community workers of the local municipality, Amidar — the National Housing Company — and the workers of the Ministry of Social Welfare recognized the possi-

bilities inherent in this idea for the welfare of the women of the community. Its success depended on finding the proper formula to link the woman's life abroad — which also expressed itself in differing laundering habits — with her way of life in Israel.

The community workers in Netivot, who had been given regular instruction by the Ministry of Social Welfare's Service for Community Work, held frank and non-committal interviews with the residents, individually and in groups, in natural meeting places in the town. The community workers concluded that a housewife club might be an answer to the needs of the residents. This impression was also based on the results of a questionnaire administered to the residents. Following this, a blueprint was drawn up to construct a community centre in which one of the facilities would be a laundry and others would be various classes, facilities for sewing and mending clothes, home economics, lessons in the Hebrew language and teaching the playing of games with children. The facilities would also provide a place for social meetings or for relaxation over a cup of tea. The assumption was that a multipurpose centre would guarantee the participation of the various groups in the centre, as well as the efficient use of the services for the benefit of the community in general, and the women in particular.

Other problems which were regarded as directly related to the laundry service were raised:

1. How would it be possible to use the same machine for the very dirty laundry of one family and the cleaner laundry of another family?
2. The women would examine each other's laundry.
3. Older persons would find it difficult to bring in their laundry to the club.
4. Women with large families would find difficulty in bringing in their large quantity of laundry.
5. The housewife would have no time to wait while the laundry was being done.
6. No woman would be able to leave her small children at home.
7. Financial circumstances might prevent a family from using the laundry facilities at the club.

The questions posed by the residents were clarified through conversations and discussions. The conclusion reached was that despite difficulties, this service would contribute greatly to the welfare of the families requiring the service, and especially to those families assisted by the welfare bureau.

Some of the conclusions arrived at, following discussions of the above problems, were as follows:

1. Following each wash, the machine would be thoroughly rinsed, so that there would be no chance of soiling the next wash.
2. Laundry could be brought in a closed bag and then removed in the same fashion.
3. Regarding the problem of older people, two suggestions were presented:
 - a. Older people would bring in dry laundry, which is light, and would remove it after drying.
 - b. Several suitable carts would be brought in for the use of those needing them. The difficulty of doing the laundry at home would far exceed the difficulty in bringing it to the club, especially since the husband and the children would assist in the latter task.
4. It would also be helpful for the woman to leave her home for a while, especially if during this time, her laundry was being done automatically.
5. While the laundry was being done, the woman could leave the club to attend to other tasks, or she could relax and chat, mend clothes or participate in a class.
6. The women could bring their children with them, and they would be under the supervision of each individual mother, or all the children could be under the supervision of one mother while the others participated in club activities.
7. Since the club was to be financed by public bodies, the price for doing a wash would be assessed solely on use of the machines, which is relatively inexpensive. Nevertheless, families needing and wishing to use the machines, but lacking the wherewithal to do so, would be able to receive assistance from the local welfare authorities.

Despite the fact that this plan was agreed on by the residents, it was clear to the community workers that the measure of the programme's success depended upon two factors, namely that:

1. The service should be administered properly by the agencies concerned.
2. The residents — the potential members — should participate in all stages of the planning and establishment of the club.

It was assumed that this was the best method of guaranteeing the suitability of the plan for the needs and character of the population. Since this experiment was dependent upon the consent of several agencies, a fact which could delay the establishment of the club, the attention of the community

workers focused on the need to achieve proper coordination between the interested bodies.

They presented the authorities with a general plan for the club. This included the proposal for its location, adaption of the building to its functions, and an estimate of expenses, including equipment.

With regard to methods of administration, the community workers suggested the election of a joint administrative committee, including public representatives and representatives of the participating agencies. The administrative committee would be responsible for the planning and establishment of the club. The role of the committee would be gradually to limit the power of the agencies, and to extend the authority of the local residents, so that the former would eventually leave the committee.

The plan was accepted by the various agencies. The committee included representatives of the local authority, the director of the welfare bureau, the community workers from Amidar and the Ministry of Social Welfare, the District Supervisor for Community Work and the representative of the Committee for Developing Netivot.

At this point, the community workers encouraged the population to participate in the establishment of the club. Discussions were held in the neighbourhood with the residents and with the leaders of the community, including rabbis, public figures and civil servants, in order to foster a positive attitude and to stimulate community participation. As a result, a Club Committee was elected, composed of three residents, two women and one man. This committee was elected from the residents attending the neighbourhood centre. The elected committee was in contact with the small executive committee, received full details regarding the activity up to that time and gradually began to participate in the club's establishment.

The first resolution of the executive was that the local authority would be the legal owner of the centre, with all the responsibilities that this implies, and would supervise the technical maintenance department. The municipality would employ a liaison worker who would concentrate on the relations between the neighbourhood and the club, and the liaison worker would be given instruction by the local community worker.

Other administrative duties of the club and its programme would be taken care of by the executive committee. The members, particularly those who were residents of the town, followed the progress of construction and acted

to speed it up. They participated in certain decisions regarding the interior decoration of the club, and also decided which classes would be given, including Hebrew lessons and classes for mothers on "children's games".

The committee also established a rota system among mothers for supervision of the children. It was decided that anyone would be permitted to use the laundry, but if it should become overcrowded, the system of priorities established by the social welfare bureau would go into effect.

The following criteria for eligibility for assistance to needy families were proposed:

1. For a welfare recipient or a person having an income not exceeding 20% of the full welfare payment — full price of the wash.
2. For a welfare recipient or a person having an income not exceeding 50% of the full welfare payment — up to 75% of the cost.
3. For a welfare recipient or a person having an income not exceeding 100% of the full welfare payment — up to 50% of the cost.

A person having an income twice the full welfare payment would pay full price.

The executive committee investigated methods of extending group activities within the club, such as classes in home economics, increasing the use of seasonal fruits, lectures on hygiene, care of the home and its equipment, fashion, arts and crafts, discussions with educators regarding the problems of children, and information about schools.

The proposals and resolutions of the committee are influenced by the local representatives, while other members generally serve as a source of information and advice. The participation of the representatives of the various agencies at the meetings is continually decreasing and the tendency is to transfer responsibility to the local representatives, who, in the near future, will fully assume responsibility of the operation of the club and its development, including recruiting external and internal resources.

It seems that the club suits the character of the community and meets its needs, a fact which is expressed in the ever-increasing number of people using its services. The automatic laundry service, the women enjoying the club's facilities, the study groups, group activities, the expansion of social ties among women from the same neighbourhood and among women from different neighbourhoods — all this constitutes direct and indirect assistance

to the housewife and her family, especially to families in distressed circumstances.

Nevertheless, it will be worthwhile, after a short period of time, to examine and evaluate systematically the extent to which the club has contributed to solving the problems of these families. These results will clarify how group activity and community organisation can help ease the problems of families in general, and families in distressed circumstances in particular.

Summary

The planning stage prior to the opening of the club lasted about three years. In retrospect, the following causes for delay may be stated:

1. This was an experimental plan, common to several agencies, and the consent of their executives was required.
2. There were delays in the preparation of specifications for construction at the Amidar Company.
3. The execution of the work by the contractor extended over the specified period of time.

These problems, which created a gap between the readiness and expectation of the community leaders and the progress at the agency level, caused difficulties for the community workers in their work with the population.

The difficulties were overcome mainly through the assistance of the head of the local authority, who had followed the plan since its inception. He assisted in overcoming the obstacles which appeared in the process of planning, handling and execution of the centre. These were also surmounted with the help of the director of the local social welfare bureau, who helped the community workers both professionally and administratively.

Four Years On

The activities of the club, which is open throughout the day and during the evening, have expanded considerably since its inauguration in 1971.

An average of sixty families make use of the washing machines, dryers and clotheslines every day. Records show that 50% are families of ten persons or more, 15% have eight to nine members, 30% have two to seven members and

5% are single, mostly old, people. Some of these families began using the club's laundry facilities when their own washing machines broke down and are still using the club's facilities today.

The majority of laundry users are women who also participate in many of the classes held in the club, such as sewing, dressmaking, knitting, crocheting, domestic science, handicrafts and civics. In addition, films are shown, teachers offer lectures on education, doctors and nurses give talks on health and counselling sessions are offered to parents. The most popular class is the course in Hebrew for which there are five study groups, two of them for men only.

While women have been using the services offered in the club since its inception, the participation of men has been slower and more selective. They tend to attend sessions for parent counselling in which both parents participate, lectures in civics and the screening of documentary films. It should be pointed out that only a minority of the men bring laundry with them when they come to the club.

The above pattern of development has resulted in the club's becoming a family centre for the residents of the neighbourhood.

Every class has an attendance of twenty-five to thirty people, the main reasons for their participation, in addition to other factors, being:

1. The laundry is done automatically, freeing the member to participate in other activities.
2. There are play areas and a toy library for children who can also do their homework under the supervision of mothers on duty at the club. This, again, frees the members, at least for a while, so that they can participate in the club's activities.

The members also take advantages of various services, such as a library, a daily newspaper section, a radio, a record player and a public telephone. Lately there has been a significant increase in the number of women who use the club for activities other than the laundry facility.

The club is administered by a committee of three — two women and one man — who are elected by the members. The committee organizes the above-mentioned activities as well as fixing the hours during which public institutions such as day care centres and clubs are allowed to use the laundry. In addition, the committee arranges for the collection and delivery of laundry

from the homes of the elderly, handicapped or ill people who are unable to leave their homes.

A neighbourhood committee was elected after informal contacts with a wide variety of people in the neighbourhood, the role of the committee being to handle matters of concern within the neighbourhood, especially those connected with improvement of services — gardens, sanitation, construction of pavements, road improvement, school building, organisation of summer camps for mothers of large families, and many other services.

Up to now, no formal research has been carried out with regard to the influence of the club on the welfare of the woman, the family and the community. However, social workers, educators, doctors and nurses have reported that relationships within the family have improved, and that the cooperation between parents and teachers and parents and the health services has improved as well.

The varied activities of the club help the social workers treat multiproblem families. The head of the local authority has stated that the feeling of belonging has increased among the residents of the neighbourhood. The committee submits legitimate applications for the improvement of neighbourhood services, while involving the residents themselves in implementation of the programmes. It should be mentioned that the involvement and activity of women in public affairs has far exceeded any expectations, since the participation of women in activities outside the home used to be taboo among the type of population which forms a majority in Netivot, originating from highly conservative and traditional North African and Middle Eastern countries.

In the light of experience gained from the club in this neighbourhood, a similar one will be established in another neighbourhood in Netivot. Fourteen other cities and towns and one regional council in a rural area have already opened at least one and in some cases two or three clubs in different neighbourhoods, using the model of Netivot. At present, dozens of housewife clubs are under construction throughout Israel which will answer the particular need of every location and neighbourhood.

One of the main conclusions reached following the implementation of the housewife clubs is that a centralised service which answers the needs of the community also allows for the development of various aids which benefit not only the community but the family and the individual as well.